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ABSTRACT

Focusing upon the interactive work-group communication patterns of employees classified as "managers," this paper compares such communication observed in Japanese and United States business and industrial organizations. The paper first describes several models of decision making within American and Japanese organizations, highlighting the normative communicative behaviors of employees in both cultures. It then compares the decision making systems of the two countries, focusing on five elements: (1) authority, (2) timeliness, (3) conflict, (4) problem solving, and (5) participation. After identifying communication differences in organization decision making in the two countries, the paper concludes that the typical organizational environments found in the United States and Japan foster distinct patterns of employee decision making behavior and concomitant communication practices. (FL)

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COMMUNICATION AND DECISION MAKING IN JAPANESE AND AMERICAN (UNITED STATES) ORGANIZATIONS: A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a cross-cultural exploration of organizational decision making in American (United States) and Japan, focusing on work-group communication patterns and practices. Several models of decision making within Japanese and American organizations are described, highlighting the normative communicative behaviors by employees in both cultures. Finally, a comparison of Japanese and American (U.S) decision-making systems is presented. This comparative examination of systems focuses on five decision-making elements: (1) authority, (2) timeliness, (3) conflict, (4) problem exploration, and (5) participation. Major communication differences in organizational decision making are identified. The paper concludes that the typical organizational environments found in the United States and Japan foster distinct patterns of employee decision-making behavior and concomitant communication practices. Each decision-making system is a product of its cultural milieu.

SPEECH COMMUNICATION AND DECISION MAKING IN JAPANESE AND AMERICAN (UNITED STATES) ORGANIZATIONS: A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON

Every day in organizations throughout Japan and the United States thousands of decisions are made by organizational employees--from CEOs to assembly-line workers. These decisions may deal with routine responses to ongoing organizational needs or reactions to newly discovered exigencies. In either case speech communication frequently provides the data upon which decisions are made, facilitates the information exchange between organizational employees, and creates a climate for developing and implementing decisions. As J. Thomas Miller stated in Advanced Management, "Communication is not only a tool but a catalyst."(1) Decisions cannot be right, correct, or precise without effective speech communication. Furthermore, speech communication and decision making are the two linking processes that maintain organizational systems.(2)

In this paper I will concern myself with the communication patterns observed in Japanese and American (United States) business and industrial organizations. I will focus upon the interactive patterns of employees classified as managers, recognizing that this label applies to a broader range of employees in Japanese than American organizations.

I will attempt to describe cultural communication models of decision making in Japan and the United States. However, it should be understood that the cultural

models discussed will not be valid for all members of the two cultures. These models provide a statement of norms which do not denote actual behaviors, rather they attempt to answer the question: What is the general nature of communication during the decision making process of an identified cultural group? And, I will attempt to distinguish between, whenever possible, "universal" communication behavior and "culture-bound" communication in the two decision making contexts. Such knowledge improves intercultural communication by showing how a communicator should adapt his or her communication techniques to the culture of the audience. As Robert T. Oliver stated, "If we are to communicate across cultural barriers, we must learn what to say and how to say it in terms of the expectations and predispositions of those we want to listen."(3)

Most descriptions of behavioral processes across cultures are shaded by the observer's own values and prejudices. Descriptions of Asian organizational phenomena by westerners have been unquestionably ethnocentric. William Howell has even suggested that this "inner conviction of ethnocentric superiority is more pronounced in Americans than in most people of the world."(4) Researchers who study the Japanese business world in order to learn from it, tend to explain that environment from a Western business world's code of behavior. Marengo states that "most Western interpretations of Japanese decision making processes are centered on pretended differences from, or disengenous confusion with, Western practices and theories".(5) In the study of speech communication across the two cultures, scholars have frequently fared no better. Sitaram noted that communication concepts which were considered by western scholars to be modern and western in origin have been explored by Asian Culture for

centuries. While I may not be completely successful, I will try to break out of the western gridwork and pursue an understanding of communication and decision making from a more objective viewpoint. However, my reliance upon translations, observations by western scholars, and only a modest familiarity with Japanese cultural practices and language will produce some observational conclusions that require further refinement and research.

Additionally, cross-cultural studies of organizational processes have been neither well organized nor unbiased.(6) Organizations have characteristically been defined within a value system common to the United States. These definitions rest upon assumptions which do not always fit well in both societies. For example, it was written recently that the Japanese model of organizational decision making is the opposite of the American model.(7) Japanese organizations emphasize collective responsibilities, whereas American organizations emphasize individual responsibility in decision making. Upon closer inspection, however, the decision making practices of both societies may not be all that different.

In both cultures decision making rests upon two basic rules: (1) a documentation rule which presumes that decisions will be based upon the broadest knowledge of relevant information available and (2) a participation rule which presumes that decisions will be based on the broadest input from competent individuals.(8) These two rules place a high value upon increasing the face-to-face interaction or speech communication among organizational employees. While employees from both cultures usually behave rationally to information

presented, the amount of information available generally exceeds the employees' processing ability. Typically, organizational employees respond by selecting, ordering, and truncating this information in accordance with their prior experiences. Culture influences the method of categorizing information, and, thus, the "bounded rationality" of employees from two dissimilar cultures differs significantly. Howard and Teramoto propose that management differences are "meta-cultural." They state that "The Japanese, through their culture, understand how decisions are made. Westerners do not."(9) Schaupp states that while some researchers have suggested that participative management and decision making are culturally universal, it is essentially normative, intermeshed with a culture and its values.(10) Let's examine the Japanese and American (United States) decision making methods separately before comparing the decision making process cross-culturally.

DECISION MAKING: THE UNITED STATES ORGANIZATION

Mark Twain is reported to have said that the only distinguishing characteristic of an American (U.S.) was a fondness for water. Actually, the American (U.S.) culture is quite distinctive. It is clearly different from those found in Asian cultures. Furthermore, it is significantly different from Western European and Latin American cultures and should not be used as a standard for western cultures. Decision making in the United States reflects its own formalized organizational structure and underlying value systems. Decision making in the United States organization reflects a heterogeneous cultural milieu. A review of the literature presents an array of different models, theories, and concepts of decision maker and decision making.

Early models explained the internal decision making of organizations through an economic theory of rational choice and a reliance on profit maximizing. The econologic model frequently described upper-level decision making by assuming that employees evaluated alternatives and chose the one with the best cost/benefit ratio. However, this model didn't explain the influence of individuals upon the selection of a decision. And, researchers have provided few instances of realistic normative or descriptive analyses of the ways individuals, groups, and organizations actually make decisions. More recently, a bounded rationality model has been used extensively. This model assumes that decisions are influenced by subjective processes, such as the interaction among employees.

The model assumes that people frequently select a decision that is "good enough", rather than trying to identify the best decision in the situation. The model assumes that employees have only a limited information processing capability. Research on this model points to findings that are critical for the communication scholar. Decision makers do not use all available and relevant information before reviewing alternatives, prioritizing them, or making a final choice. Intuition, values, perceptions, and other "irrational" factors affect decision making. The documentation rule is not confirmed in actual practice.

In the United States research and college textbooks emphasize the individual decision maker in our organizations. The manager changes organizational procedures for subordinates. Decisions are proposed, implemented, and defined from top to bottom in the hierarchical levels.

Thompson and Tunderve identified four dominant models systems operating in United States organizations.(11) The first model is called decision by computing. This model operates in situations in which the work group knows both the basis of the problem and the solution preference. Since no real choice exists among decision alternatives, decision making can be programmed. This model is found in the formal structure of business firms, governmental agencies, and military units. The model relies on individual expertise or electronic assistance to accomplish the task. Delegation of decision making authority is common, and the decision units are generally composed of individuals rather than groups.

The second model is called decision by majority vote. This model operates in situations in which the work group cannot agree on the bases of a problem or lack "proof" that a particular alternative will resolve a difficulty. This model presumes the face-to-face interaction of all group members in the decision process. Each member provides pertinent information, is expected to participate in the decision process, and given an equal influence (vote) over the final choice. The decision will be determined by a vote of the group. It is also expected that members will abide by the majority decision. This decision model is commonly found in voluntary organizations and is formalized in the constitutions and bylaws of many organizations, including our own colleges.

The third decision model is called compromising. This model operates when group members can agree on the bases of a problem, but not the solution. In this decision model the group attempts to discover a solution satisfactory to all members or at least the significant members of the group. Compromise decisions require that all important factions be involved in the decision discussion. The United States Congress approximates this decision unit. Although the final decision in the U.S. Congress is a "vote", it occurs only after a significant amount of bargaining and compromise. The vote is the final action which binds the negotiation process.

The fourth model of decision making is called decision by inspiration. This model may operate when there is disagreement regarding both the bases of the problem and the available solutions. In such a situation some groups may disintegrate or decide not to solve the problem. In some cases such situations are resolved by calling on divine guidance. Given our penchant for providing others with omniscient powers in times of extreme stress, group members may rely on charismatic leaders. The group resolves it own problem by changing the existing situation into a computational situation relying on a decision unit composed of a single individual.

Some organizations adopt one strategy--computation, collective judgment, compromise or inspiration--as their dominant strategy, and base their decision structure on that system. Such inflexibility can lead to problems because the organizations deal with so many different kinds of issues over time.

Most organizations strive for efficiency in their operation, leading to more regularity, pattern, and structure. The type of decision system may change overtime to routinize the existing organizational operations. For example, the increased scope of the U.S. government over the past four decades required the establishment of numerous agencies to make decisions for Congress. Problems which previously were subject to bargaining or voting by Congressmen are handled by individual experts.

In order for modern organizations to utilize any of the four decision models, it is assumed that members have access to all available, pertinent information about the problem. In practice the optimal sharing of information is rarely achieved. A minority group of members in an organization can control the decision apparatus by keeping critical information from a superior. Baskin and Arnoff suggest that a level based information decision making model operates in large organizations. Upper management gathers information about the environment (internal and external). Based on this information, top management makes long-run decisions about organizational goals and policies which are transmitted to middle management for implementation. In turn middle management makes decisions within parameters prescribed by top management. Middle managers make more general decisions regarding goals and translate them into an action plan for implementation. Finally, lower management takes the plan and implements the decision into action. As we move down the managerial hierarchy, the time available for planning and implementing the decisions decreases.(12)

DECISION-MAKING: THE JAPANESE ORGANIZATION

If the United States organization is categorized by heterogenity, the Japanese organizational operations are more consistent. In most Japanese organizations decision making involves continuous communication and widespread employee participation. It involves a high volume of communication and the amount of communication leads to a greater understanding among employees. Furthermore, the Japanese organization can be categorized by more lateral and upward communication and less downward communication than Western organizations.

The decision process involves two stages. The first stage focuses on defining the problem. The second stage involves seeking consensus on the problem or question through a process of give and take. Employees seek to assure themselves that they are not only solving a problem, but that they are solving the right problem.(13) Employees are encouraged to explore alternatives by focusing on the problem. Dickerman has stated that "the most important aspect of the Japanese decision making process is deciding on a full range of alternatives without commitment to any specific recommendation."(14) The structure of the communication process makes it unique, but not culture-bound. Hattori divided Japanese decision making into five sequential elements: (1) defining the problems, (2) analyzing the problem, (3) finding solutions, (4) selecting a solution (approval), and (5) execution.(15) This model is not unlike the reflective thinking model developed by John Dewey to describe Western decision making.

However, within these stages and sequential elements can be seen certain unique processes that appear to be indigenous to Japan. Japanese organizations make extensive use of "nemawashi" and "ringi". The first process, nemawashi, involves informal negotiation and persuasion prior to reaching the final decision. This process relies upon effective speech communication for success. Ringi, on the other hand, which uses both oral and written communication is more formal and provides the structure for adopting the official decision. It has been estimated that 90 percent of all Japanese companies uses this process for decision making.(16) Nemawashi and ringi processes abide by the participation rule. Discussion of a decision area involves all managerial personnel affected by the final decision. Groups rather than individuals comprise the basic unit of organization. Approval for a decision is sought informally and then formalized by a written document signed by all involved parties. Decision responsibility is thus spread across the involved employees on both vertical and horizontal levels. Long and Seo state that "In a sense, there is no individual decision maker, since the decision is made by the group, and each interested party yields veto power."(17)

The success of the ringi process is dependent upon effective interpersonal communication. There is a heavy reliance on informal personal relations. Discussion, negotiation, and bargaining are performed through personal networks. Frequent face-to-face interaction is essential. Communication must take a subtle form since the employees are boud to the organization and must manage disagreements and conflicts in a way that avoid imparing subsequent relationships. Thus, communication becomes more subtle, discrete, and indirect.

Such interaction also requires a base of shared understanding and common interest. The physical setting must be one that encourages regular face-to-face interaction. Frequently, imbedded within ringi process is a communication technique called matomari, involving the controlled discussion of the written decision. Similar to the brainstorming discussion technique commonly used in Western settings, it involves the creation of a forum in which the highest level managers share opinions on the ringisho (written decision document). Through formal and informal speech communication participants attempt to reach consensus on an official decision. And voting and agreement regarding a specific decision are not used. Yoshino believes this entire process is culture-bound, relying more on cultural values and less explicitly on defined formal organizational mechanisms.(18)

Although addressed less frequently in Western literature, nemawashi may play a more critical role than ringi in reaching the final decision. This process pre-empts the official decision making procedures and establishes the ground rules for reaching the final decision. Systematic and conscious pre-emption can occur at all managerial levels in Japanese organizations. Since the process involves face-to-face communication it avoids the sense of commitment residing in a written decision. The process is also better suited to developing unofficial understandings among employees and, thus, permits their movement from separate positions to a mutually agreed position.

DECISION MAKING: A COMPARISON OF SYSTEMS

Students of decision making are almost inevitably contrasting Japanese "groupism" with United states "individualism." While such differences do exist, the comparisons provided often have a certain meaning in the United States and a different one in Japan. Let me point out five areas that can be used to distinguish decision making in Japan and the United States, focusing on the role of communication in each area.

Authority

1. Japanese managers are more sensitive to the inclusion of employees in decision making. They maintain a closer personal relationship with employees. Employee acceptance and participation is fostered by the leaders show of consern and a general development of a group espirit de corps. Hirokawa suggests that the social assessbility of Japanese managers promotes communication within the organization.(19) While including the work group in the discussion, managers do not give up control over major decisions. Managers may discuss a particular problem with the employees only after they are certain their position will prevail in selecting the final decision. As Rohelen states, "The conclusions may be foregone, but the fact that discussions are held is very important since the chief is expected to share his opinions, ask for advice, and permit dissenting voices to emerge."(20)

2. In the United States organizations most managers resist personal involvement with employees due to fear of biasing their decisions. They believe social familiarity leads to a decrease in respect for the superior and a decrease in leadership status.
3. In the United States authority is clearly identified in the organization, usually on an individual basis, whereas in Japan the allocation of authority within organizations is not always well defined, particularly at lower levels of management. Companies may not have job descriptions or a written policy as we find in most United States firms.
4. Authoritarian decision making is common in United States organizations. Individual managers act within their delegated authority to make their own management decisions. Long and Seo note that while United States managers may use consensus consultation as an aid in reaching a decision, the Japanese consensus is the decision.(21) In the United States discussion of a decision frequently takes place after the decision is made.
5. Ouchi observes that while some United States organizations use a consensual, participative style of decision making, the final responsibility for decision continues to rest with the manager.(22)

Timeliness

1. The Japanese organization takes longer to make final decisions. All affected groups are consulted and their agreement is sought prior to reaching a decision.
2. In the United States it may take longer to implement the decision because employees who are involved in putting the decision into action have not been involved in the decision making process.

If we view the total decision process, including the implementation stage, there may not be any significant time differences between United States and Japanese decision making.(23)

Conflict

1. Japanese decision making is often characterized as a system which avoids conflict, suppresses dissent, and promotes conformity. This behavioral generalization has an element of truth. The system does provide means for avoiding face-to-face confrontations and the suppression of criticism. Dissent does occur but the response made varies from the United States model. Group members are more flexible and tolerant in dealing with conflict.
2. It has been suggested that the suppression of conflict and disagreement by Japanese decision makers leads to "irrational decisions within a system of irresponsibility."(24)
3. United States managers expect conflict and disagreement, particularly with unstructured problems. Frequently, conflict results from individual differences. It is not uncommon for unwanted behavior to be handled by sanctions.

Tsurini states, "While American managers assume interpersonal relationships to e upon occasion adversary in nature, Japanese managers assume them to be naturally cooperative."(25) However, conflict in United States organizations is neither sought nor desired. All large organizations suppress internal dissent. such behavior isn't culture bound. The techniques and methods of suppression, on the other hand, may be culture specific.(26)

Problem Exploration

1. In Japanese decision making the focus is on whether there is a need for a decision and what the decision is about. Such action can create greater involvement and commitment on the part of employees. Drucker believes the Japanese decision making process is effective because it focuses on understanding the problem.(27)
2. In the United States the emphasis in decision making is on providing an answer to the problem.(28) Decisions are often yes-no judgments. The positive response is the decision.
3. Cooper suggests that the Japanese differ from Westerners in that they reach decisions without making yes-no judgments. Solutions emerge from group discussions.(29)

Participation

Participative decision making is endorsed by organizational leaders in most industrialized nations, including the United States and Japan (Tannenbaum, 1980).

1. Clinical studies by Abegglen, Yoshino, Johnson and Ouchi have led to the view that Japanese managers emphasize consultative decision making, have a high degree of immersion in the communication process, and are able to communicate quickly and easily up and down the organizational hierarchy.(30)
2. In a comparison of United States and Japanese firms Pascale found that Japanese firms exhibit significantly higher face-to-face contacts, a greater proportion of communication initiated by subordinates, but no significant differences in the frequency of employing consultative decision making.

Pascale concluded that, "while there are differences, the preponderance of evidence suggests wide areas of commonality between Japanese and American (United States) communication and decision making practices."(31)

What are the major communication differences in organizational decision making across the two cultures?

1. United States managers rely heavily on written communication to transmit their positions during the initial decision recognition stage of decision making. The Japanese manager is involved in more oral face-to-face consultation prior to drawing up a written position paper.(32)
2. In the United States the communication patterns vary more to cope with the heterogeneous and diverse values which are required for the development of formal and explicitly defined organizational structure and control systems. The Japanese decision making system has developed in a more homogenous and cohesive communication environment that relies more heavily on culturally induced values and less on formal organizational mechanisims. Yoshino suggests that "the very strength of the Japanese system derives from the highly homogeneous and shared values, the introduction of heterogeneous elements to any significant degree is likely to be disruptive and desentegrative."(33)
3. Managers in the United States are constantly striving to clarify the communication between employees on substantive matters. In the United States specificity and explicitness are desired communication goals. Pascale and Athos observe that organizational communication in Japan is more implicit. Listeners are encouraged to consider a number of interpreta-

tions. Vagueness in communication can hold relationships together and reduce unwanted, perhaps, unnecessary conflict.(34)

4. Hirokawa observes that the United States manager is less accessible to his subordinates than his Japanese counterpart. Such accessibility encourages vertical communication, particularly upward communication. Hirokawa states that such accessibility increases the likelihood that these co-workers will approach him/her for the purpose of interacting on various work related topics.(35)
5. As Howard and Teramato note, in the United States communication which pre-empts official decision making is generally limited to upper levels of management. At lower managerial levels such actions are generally considered dishonest and improper. In Japan such communication behavior is accepted and in most instances expected. All involved managerial levels thoroughly discuss an issue in order to reach a common base of understanding. Participation is far more widespread than in United States organizations.(36)
6. Open communication in Japanese work groups doesn't mean that employees feel free to express <u>any</u> opinion on a problem or issue. While a highly informal atmosphere to interact is created, the discourse is one of exposition, rather than argument. Since employees have worked together for a period of time, they know each others position on an issue and can, therefore, adjust their comments from the start of a discussion with a statement of positions. And members must adjust or develop new arguments based on areas of disagreement.(37)

CONCLUSION

A significant question being asked today by United States management is whether the primary Japanese decision making system can be adopted by United States organizations. Kume suggests that the American cultural values of individualism and self-reliance would make it difficult to adopt the Japanese decision making process.(38) Schein suggests that the participatory methods can be used in United States organizations. However, the use of these methods must be based on the assumption that teamwork and participation are more effective ways of solving problems. Teamwork, consensus, and generalized employee involvement in the United States are not ends in themselves.(39)

The typical organizational environments found in the United States and Japan foster distinct patterns of employee decision-making behavior and concomitant communication practices. Are the communication practices found in United States or Japanese decision making better? In practical terms it's impossible to answer this question. Each system is a product of its cultural milieu. The question isn't whether one system is superior to another, but whether the proper system is being used in the proper place at the proper time.

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